DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 185 CS 207 703

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TITLE Media Use and Voter Uncertainty.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (66th, Corvallis, OR, August 6-9, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Decision Making; Elections; Evaluative Thinking; Mass Media; *Mass Media Effects; *Media Research; Political Issues; *Voting
IDENTIFIERS *Media Use; Ohio (Columbus); *Uncertainty

ABSTRACT

A study conducted in Columbus, Ohio, assessed the importance of voter uncertainty in motivating media use and use of specific campaign information. Data were collected from a telephone survey of 540 persons registered to vote in Columbus or surrounding Franklin County. Decisional difficulty, likelihood of vote change, and knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate were measured as types of certainty. For the candidate uncertainty measures, results indicated that those voters who rented rather than owned homes, those less than 40 years in age, and females tended to be significantly more uncertain. Independents were also more likely to be uncertain than Democrats and Republicans. Younger voters and females reported being more uncertain about the gubernatorial race. Independents and Republicans were significantly more likely to think they would change their vote choice for governor than were Democrats. For the uncertainty measure based on knowledge of candidate strengths and weaknesses, no significant differences in demographic or partisan groups emerged. Of importance was the finding that knowledge measures were not always satisfactory measures of uncertainty. Many voters who were low in knowledge did not report that their voting decision had been difficult or that they were likely to change their vote. (HOD)

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Media Use and Voter Uncertainty

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Presented to the Theory and Methodology Division of the Association for Education in Journalism at the annual convention, Corvallis, Oregon, August 1983.

CS 207703

Media Use and Voter Uncertainty

In the civics book view of election campaigns, voters attend to campaign speeches and news reports, weigh the pros and cons, and vote on election day for the candidate judged to be most qualified. Most of the evidence available, of course, suggests this civics book model of electoral decision-making holds only in the civics books.

Numerous studies have shown that less than a third of the voters actually make up their minds during the height of the campaign (Katz, 1971). The traditional political science view, based to a large degree on campaign studies conducted in the 1940s, is that the campaign is a reinforcing, not change, agent (Patterson and McClure, 1976).

Implied in this notion of reinforcement, of course, is the idea that not all decisions are equally firm. Some decisions are open to or in need of reinforcement, while others are hardened and impervious even to reinforcement. In other words, decisions are classifiable on a continuum from certain to uncertain. The logical end would be the unmade decision, the most uncertain. People, similarly, could be classified in terms of the degree of certainty of their decision.

Uncertainty would seem to play an important role in communication research because of its potential as a motivator. It would seem to be a possible antecedent of campaign media use, and such media use would likely have impact on decisional certainty. The political communication literature, however, has not to this point assigned decisional uncertainty a prominent role.

Some Recent Research

The recent work by Chaffee and Choe (1980) has focused attention anew on the role of the communication in the political campaign. The

Chaffee and Choe analysis of the 1976 presidential election challenges the old assumption that campaign communication has no effect because those who use these materials already have made up their minds about the candidates. These researchers identified a group of voters, about a third of the sample, who decided during the campaign. While these voters were relatively low in media use prior to the campaign, they were moderately high in the use of campaign materials. In other words, there was evidence that the media had some impact on their ability to decide. This interpretation was reinforced by replication of the analysis for the 1980 presidential election by Goldman and Whitney (1982).

While neither Chaffee and Choe nor Goldman and Whitney concern themselves with voter uncertainty, it can be argued that those persons who made up their minds before the campaign got underway were more certain about their decision than those who decided during the campaign. The media use strategies of the latter group can be viewed as attempts to reduce that uncertainty by making a decision.

In a study of voter decision-making in the 1980 presidential primary season, Kennamer and Chaffee (1981) found that those groups in the population high in media use as the campaign got underway were most uncertain about decisions to be made, presumably because they had a great deal of information. Some evidence was found, however, that as the campaign progressed, uncertainty decreased for those high in media use.

In work by McCombs and Weaver (1973) and Weaver (1980) voter uncertainty is combined with a measure of political interest to form a typology of need for orientation. High levels of voter need for orientation have been found to lead to increased media use which results in

increased agenda-setting effects. The uncertainty measure used in this concept is usually restricted to firmness of choice of political candidate and degree of professed partisanship.

In a study primarily concerned with the conceptual distinctiveness of pre- and post-decisional motivations to attend to campaign information, Becker and Demers (1982) employed the concept of voter uncertainty. Voters who used the mass media routinely and/or paid attention to media dealing specifically with the campaign were expected to be low in uncertainty, while those not using the media in these ways were expected to be high in uncertainty. Uncertainty, in addition, was expected to be associated with an expressed need for additional information about the candidates and the campaign.

While the Becker and Demers analyses were supportive of the general motivational distinctions being made, they were wholly unsupportive of the expected relationships between media use and uncertainty and uncertainty and a need for information. The authors offered methodological shortcomings of the uncertainty measure as an explanation.

The focus of this study is to directly assess the importance of voter uncertainty in motivating media use and use of specific campaign information. Previous research has not made this direct assessment and has been guided by a narrow conceptualization of voter uncertainty. In the Becker and Demers (1982) study, a simple measure of uncertainty was treated as an intervening variable between general media use and the need for specific campaign information. In the Chaffee and Choe (1980) study, uncertainty is not explicitly examined. In the need for orientation literature (Weaver, 1980), uncertainty is one part of a composite, researcher-designated typology.

Specific Expectations

The research reported here has as its starting point the work of Chaffee and Choe (1980), Goldman and Whitney (1981) and Becker and Demers (1982). Uncertainty is viewed as a psychological state associated with a decision. Persons who have not made a decision would be thought of as most uncertain about it, while those who had made a decision would vary in terms of the certainty felt about that decision.

Certainty (and uncertainty) as viewed here is decidedly psychological; it is a state of an individual. This is consistent with the psychology literature where uncertainty is viewed as resulting from inconsistencies or deficiencies in the cognitive environment of the individual and as having a potentially motivating influence on behavior (Berkowitz, 1969). Uncertainty also has played a key role in the organizational literature, where uncertainty is defined as existing in that situation "where there is a lack of knowledge about the present or future states of variables that affect the organization" (Bobbitt, Breinholt, Doktor and McNaul, 1978, p. 90). Both individual decision-makers and organizations in the process of making decisions are classified according to their state of uncertainty.

Consistent with the psychological and organizational literature, uncertainty as defined here is thought to result from a lack of information on the part of the individual. In other words, information has the potential to reinforce and strengthen decisions already made and lead to the making of decisions. Individuals are viewed as active seekers and processers of information capable of finding in the campaign situation information which would serve that reinforcing role. The media, as the prime, though not exclusive, source of information, would have the

potential to produce certainty. Individual use of the media and interpersonal sources of information, then, would be expected to produce certainty and reduce uncertainty.

Uncertainty, on the other hand, is expected to be a motivating state, leading to subsequent media use. Those voters confronted with unmade decisions are expected to feel a need for information and actually seek out media and interpersonal sources for that information. For this reason the most uncertain are expected to be most interested in anticipated forthcoming campaign information and most likely to actually use that information once it is available.

These expectations are summarized in Figure I and in two rather straightforward hypotheses below.

H_1: General media use and use of specific campaign information will be negatively related to level of decisional uncertainty.

H_2: Level of decisional uncertainty will be positively related to interest in a subsequent use of campaign information sources.

Methodology

Data from a multi-purposed study conducted in Columbus, Ohio, in the Autumn of 1982 allow for a test of these two simple hypotheses. The data stem from a telephone survey of 540 persons registered to vote in Columbus or surrounding Franklin County. The project was funded in part by one of the local newspapers; interviewers were students enrolled in graduate research methods classes. Interviewers were trained and supervised by the authors. Respondent names were drawn probabilistically

from voter registration lists: return rate for the main part of the study was 69.5%.

Interviews were conducted with the 540 respondents in the second week of October. After the election in November, as part of the verification process for the study, interviews were conducted with 101 persons in the City of Columbus who had indicated in October that they planned to vote.

Uncertainty was measured in several different ways in the study. First were two measures based on whether the respondent had decided to vote in two different types of questions on the ballot: those dealing with candidates for state and national office and those dealing with state-wide issues on the ballot. The candidates were running for the following offices: governor, state attorney general, state auditor, secretary of state, state treasurer, U.S. Senate, and Congress. The three state issues dealt with constitutional amendments to allow the state to aid in the financing of private housing, to authorize the state to build a high-speed passenger rail service, and to change the systems of selecting members of the state Public Utilities Commission. The most uncertain persons stated preferences in none of these contests; the most certain had decided in all contests.

Those persons who had decided how they would vote in the gubernatorial contest were asked a series of questions about that decision. First, they were asked how difficult it had been to make the decision. Then they were asked how likely it was that they would change their minds before election day. Finally, they were asked to list the strengths of the candidate they had chosen and (separately) the weaknesses of the candidates rejected. The first two items were treated as distinct measures of uncertainty; the final two measures were combined to create an uncertainty measure indicating how much information the respondent had on the candidates.

In the post-election interviews, respondents were asked how much confidence they had "that they had made the right decision" in the race for governor. In addition, they were asked if they actually made a decision. These two items were used for post-election indicants of uncertainty.

Amount of local television news viewing was measured by two items asking the number of days per week the early evening and the late evening news were watched. These were simply summed to create an index. Newspaper readership was indexed by the number of issues of the local newspapers of the 15 possible the respondent read during the week. An index of campaign media use was created by summing responses to two questions. One asked how closely respondents had followed news stories in the media dealing with the campaign to that point. The other asked how closely respondents had followed advertisements. Amount of discussion was measured by asking respondents how frequently they had talked about politics with their family and friends in the last week.

In the post-election instrument respondents were asked how much attention they actually had paid in the last two weeks of the campaign to the advertisements and pamphlets for the candidates and election issues and how much attention they had paid to stories in the media about the campaign. Responses were summed to create an index of late campaign media use. Amount of interpersonal communication about the election was measured by asking how much the respondent actually had discussed the campaign with family and friends in the last two weeks of the campaign.

To measure the respondent's need for election information the three items used by Becker and Demers (1982) were included in both

survey instruments. Respondents were asked to what extent they felt they needed more information on how the candidates for governor stood on the issues, on the personalities, characteristics and backgrounds of the gubernatorial candidates, and on what the candidates for governor actually would do once elected. In the post-election instrument, respondents were asked if they had these feelings at the end of the campaign. The decision was made to focus questions on the gubernatorial election because it was the most prominent and some reference was thought to be necessary for the information need items.

In the October schedule, respondents were asked how likely it was that they would watch proposed debates between the gubernatorial candidates, how likely it was that they would pay attention to the various endorsements of the news media, how likely it was they would look at League of Woman Voters election sketches, and how likely it was that they would pay particular attention to the advertisements and mailings of the candidates for and against the ballot issues. The last three items were combined to form an index. The debate item was analyzed separately since it dealt only with the gubernatorial candidates. In the post-election instrument, as noted above, respondents were asked about actual media use. No question was included on the debates because none were held.

Results

The data in Table 1 show some support for the expectation that media use will be negatively related with voter uncertainty. Though the correlations are all small, candidate uncertainty, or the number of unmade decisions in the various races for political offices, is related negatively to media use.

Those persons who view local television news, read the local newspapers, report having paid attention to election news to that point, and report having discussed the campaign with the family and friends had made more decisions than those who had not. For issue uncertainty, the results are rather inconclusive. Only newspaper use is significantly related to the number of decisions made on the three constitutional issues on the ballot, and here the relationship is small.

Persons watching local television news are slightly less likely to report having had difficulty making the decision about the gubernatorial candidates than those not watching local television news. In fact, all of the relationships for media use and this variable are negative; all are also rather small. The same can be said of the fourth measure of uncertainty examined in Table 1. Those persons reading the local newspapers and those paying particular attention to campaign materials are less likely to think they will change their gubernatorial vote than those not reading papers or paying attention to campaign materials. All relationships are negative, and all are small.

Campaign discussion and attention paid to campaign messages are both negatively related to the final measure of uncertainty presented here. Persons who discussed the campaign and those who paid attention to specific campaign materials were more likely to be able to mention strengths and weaknesses of the candidates than others. Standard media use measures, however, did not show the expected negative relationship with this uncertainty measure.

Table 2 shows the interrelationships of the three measures of uncertainty presented in the right-hand side of Table 1. These are the measures dealing exclusively with uncertainty for the gubernatorial

election. In each case, only those persons who actually had made up their minds about their vote were examined. As expected, there is a relationship between reporting difficulty in making the decision and likelihood of changing that decision. And both of these measures are related to knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. But the expectation is that knowledge would serve as the intervening and explanatory variable for uncertainty, and the relationships shown in this table are only mildly supportive of that notion. Clearly many people who were low in knowledge did not report that the decision had been difficult or that they were likely to change their vote. There is the first hint, here, that the relationship between knowledge and uncertainty may be more complex than originally thought. In other words, the measures of knowledge here may not be a satisfactory measure of uncertainty, for many people are certain (as measured by the other items) and not high in knowledge.

Table 3 shows that uncertainty, as measured by difficulty of decision and likelihood of change of that decision, is motivating. Those persons who are most uncertain in terms of these measures are more likely to report they felt a need for information. It is perhaps worth noting that overall the most highly endorsed of the three items included in the information need index tapped the voters feeling that they needed to know more about what the candidates would do once elected. Next most important in terms of endorsements was the need for information about the issue stands of the candidates. A need for information on the personalities and backgrounds of the candidates was least endorsed. Again in Table 3 there is evidence about the distinctiveness of the knowledge measure of uncertainty. Low levels of knowledge, in contrast to the other measures, do not seem

to serve as a motivating force. In other words, those persons without an ability to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates were no more likely to report a need for additional information than those persons with such information.

Table 4 extends the analysis by looking directly at the link between a stated need for information and interest in and actual use of specific campaign materials. Because the measure of information need is limited to the gubernatorial campaign alone, the relationships between uncertainty and interest in and use of campaign materials also is examined.

As was expected, information need is consistently related to stated interest in campaign materials and actual use of those materials. Those persons who reported feeling a need for additional information on the gubernatorial candidates were more likely to indicate they would watch debates between the candidates and to express an interest in such campaign materials as newspaper endorsements, League of Women Voter materials, and leaflets and advertisements than those without this need. The measures of interest in the debates and other campaign materials were placed relatively early in the questionnaire and separated by 19 rather diverse items from the three items making up the information need index, so these correlations probably are more than repetition of the same sentiments. In addition, the persons with an expressed need for information were more likely to have used that information by the time the November elections took place and have discussed the campaign with family and friends, the data in Table 4 show. In the October interviews, respondents expressed most interest in the nonpartisan League materials, with 45.7% saying they would be very likely to pay attention to them, and lesser interest in the endorsement (23.7% said they would be very likely to pay attention to them) and

leaflets and advertisements (with 21.1% saying they would be very likely to pay attention).

Perhaps because uncertainty is not directly related to media use, but rather related through the motivational variable of information need, the remaining correlations in Table 4 are small and largely unpatterned. Two exceptions are worth noting, however. First, persons not having made decisions about the candidates or the issues, as well as those who had made a decision but who lacked information about the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates, were less likely to have used an obvious source of campaign information--interpersonal contacts--during the final part of the campaign. In contrast, those persons who had made up their minds about a candidate but who reported the decision was a difficult one or who thought it likely they would change that decision were more likely to have used interpersonal sources. The second observation is related to the first. Those persons who had made decisions but who lacked information were less likely to be interested in campaign materials such as the League information and endorsements and less likely to have actually paid attention to the campaign materials as well as less likely to have discussed the campaign than those with information. This finding reinforces that of Table 3 that a lack of information isn't necessarily motivating.

In Table 5 and 6 the hypotheses about antecedents and consequences of uncertainty are examined again for those respondents contacted for the November interviews. As expected, those persons who discussed the campaign during the final weeks were more confident they had made the correct decision (though the relationship isn't large or significant with so few cases), though the expected relationship for campaign information

use isn't present here. Use of campaign materials as well as amount of interpersonal discussion are related to having actually made a decision and having voted on election day. Those persons who followed the campaign and discussed it voted.

Finally, in Table 6 it is clear that a lack of confidence in a made decision is related to a need for information, while those who didn't make any decision at all were less likely to feel a need for information than those who had made that decision. Clearly, two different kinds of uncertainty are operating here.

Conclusions:

The data reported here show some support for the hypotheses. Uncertainty does appear to be a product of low levels of media use, and uncertainty serves to motivate voters to subsequently use the media. However, such a summary misses much of what can be learned here.

Perhaps the most important message is that uncertainty is not a simple concept, though it may well be an important one for understanding media and other communication behaviors in the campaign setting.

Weisberg and Fiorina (1980) argue that "rational voter models" of electoral behavior are inadequate because they ignore the pervasive nature of uncertainty. This uncertainty enters the voting decision in a variety of ways. First, voters can be uncertain about candidates and issues or lack information. Uncertainty can be attributed to the voter's information processing capacity. A candidate might project a specific issue-position but the voter can misperceive that position. Secondly, uncertainty can be a product of the behavior of competing candidates. Candidates can conceal exact intentions or say different things to

different audiences. Thirdly, there is uncertainty in the electoral process itself. Voters realize that future situations are inherently uncertain. Candidates may justifiably (or otherwise) abondon previous commitments or be bounded by a host of factors.

This study has focused on voter uncertainty about candidates and issues. Decisional difficulty, likelihood of vote change, and knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate also were measured as types of uncertainty. Each of these conceptualizations is distinctive.

For the candidate uncertainty measure, voters who rent rather than own their homes, those less than 40 and females tend to be significantly more uncertain. Independents also are more likely to be uncertain than Democrats and Republicans. For the issue uncertainty measure, females tend to be significantly more uncertain but there are no other demographic differences.

Younger voters and females report being more uncertain about the gubernatorial race, and independents are significantly more uncertain than Republicans and Democrats. Independents and Republicans are significantly more likely to think they would change their vote choice for governor than Democrats. For the uncertainty measure based on knowledge of candidate strenths and weaknesses, no significant differences in demographic or partisan grouns emerged.

Of importance is the finding that knowledge measures may not always be satisfactory measures of uncertainty. Many voters who were low in knowledge did <u>not</u> report that their voting decision had been difficult or that they were likely to change their vote.

Further, voters who had made decisions but who lacked information were less likely to be interested in campaign materials such as endorsements or League of Women Voters information. These voters were less likely to have actively paid attention to the campaign materials as well as less likely to have discussed the campaign than those with such information. In sum, a lack of knowledge may not necessarily motivate voters to use the media during the campaign.

These data argue that uncertainty is a complex phenomenon. Some people who are uncertain are motivated by that state, while others are not. The way uncertainty is conceptualized and measured will have an effect on the findings. At a minimum, future research needs to distinguish between motivating and nonmotivating uncertainty.

The data also seem to suggest the value of examining uncertainty as a focal variable in voting analysis. While it is clear from the data presented here that uncertainty is not unidimensional and that future conceptualizations must take into consideration, at a minimum, the distinctions noted above, uncertainty seems to have advantages over a variable such as campaign interest in examining subsequent communication behaviors. A link between interest and media use may well be tautological, while a link between types of uncertainty and media use is consistent with the notion that media use is motivated behavior. The role of the researcher is to isolate the factors leading to the motivation.

FIGURE 1

Summary of Expectations

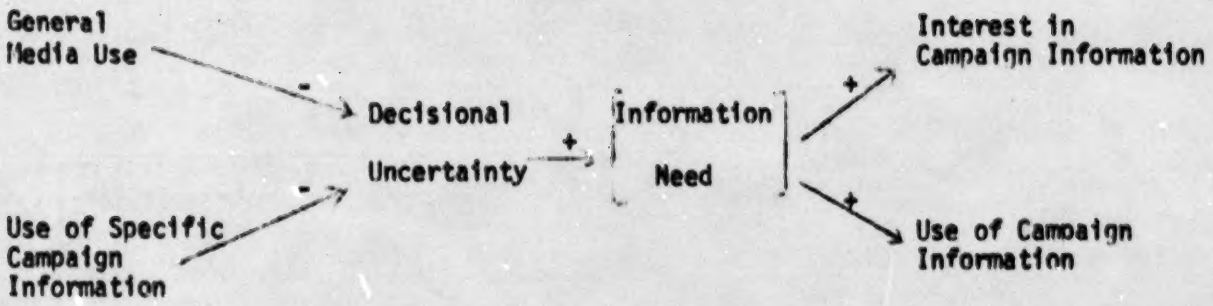

TABLE 1

Correlations (Pearson) Between Communication and Uncertainty:

October Data

	Uncertainty Measures				
	Candidate Uncertainty	Issues Uncertainty	Decisional Difficulty*	Likelihood of Change*	Know Strengths/ Weaknesses*
Local TV News Viewing	-.10**	-.03	-.12**	-.04	.02
Newspaper Readership	-.17**	-.09**	-.06	-.11**	-.03
Radio News Use	-.05	-.06	-.03	-.04	-.06
Campaign Information Attention	-.11**	.03	-.06	-.11**	-.20**
Interpersonal Discussion	-.19**	.03	-.03	-.04	-.19**
N=	513	514	375	374	385

*These deal only with the governor's race.

**Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

TABLE 2

Correlations (Pearson) Among Three Measures of Uncertainty About Gubernatorial Choice: October Data

	Decisional Difficulty	Likelihood of Change	Know Strengths/ Weaknesses
Decisional Difficulty	-		
Likelihood of Change	.49	-	
Know Strengths/ Weaknesses	.15	.16	-

N = 374

TABLE 3

Correlations (Pearson) Between Information Need and Three Measures of Uncertainty About Gubernatorial Choice: October Data

	Information Need
Decisional Difficulty	.31*
Likelihood of Change	.21*
Know Strengths/ Weaknesses	.04

N = 371

*Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

TABLE 4

Correlations (Pearson) of Information Need and Uncertainty

With Media Use: October and November Data

	October		November	
	Interest in Gubernatorial Debate (N=539)	Interest in Campaign Information (N=540)	Use Campaign Information (N=101)	Inter-personal Discussion (N=101)
Information** Need (N=371)	.18*	.13*	.24*	.29*
Candidate Uncertainty (N=513)	.00	-.01	.01	-.11
Issue Uncertainty (N=514)	.02	.05	-.11	-.23*
Decisional Difficulty** (N=375)	.06	.03	.01	.32*
Likelihood of Change** (N=374)	.07	.04	.05	.27*
Know Strengths/ Weaknesses** (N=385)	-.02	-.08*	-.24*	-.19*

*Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

**These measures deal only with the governor's race.

TABLE 5

Correlations (Pearson) Between Media and Interpersonal Discussion and Uncertainty: November Data

	Lack of Confidence in Gubernatorial Vote	Decision on Gubernatorial Candidate (Hi = No Decision)
Use of Campaign Information	.05	-.27*
Interpersonal Discussion	-.11	-.29*
N=	99	92

*Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

TABLE 6

Correlations (Pearson) Between Uncertainty and Information Need: November Data

	Information Need
Lack of Confidence in Gubernatorial Vote	.20*
Decision on Gubernatorial Candidate (Hi = No Decision)	-.16
N=	97

*Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

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